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Film Review: The Thin Red Line

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Reviews

The Thin Red Line

Director/writer: Terrence Malick. Producers: Michael Geisler, John Roberdeau, Grant Hill. Cinematographer: John Toll. Production designer: Jack Fisk. Music: Hans Zimmer. Fox 2000 Pictures.

A basic tension between irony and ardency informs Terrence Malick's films of the 1970s—*Badlands* (1974) and *Days of Heaven* (1979). The outlaw-lovers-on-the-run template of *Badlands* splits the difference between the socially conscious romanticism of Nicholas Ray's *They Drive by Night* (1947) and the counter-culture mythmaking of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), while *Days of Heaven* weds Whitman's poetic ideal of the democratic vista to the interior landscapes of Henry James, with a plot that evokes *The Wings of the Dove* even as it ends with a quasi-Biblical plague of locusts. The later film's sources may on the whole be classically literary, including Mark Twain and Willa Cather, but the film shares some of the aestheticist detachment of the earlier film, a cool distanciation that inheres in the formalist rigor of its imagery and the inexorable

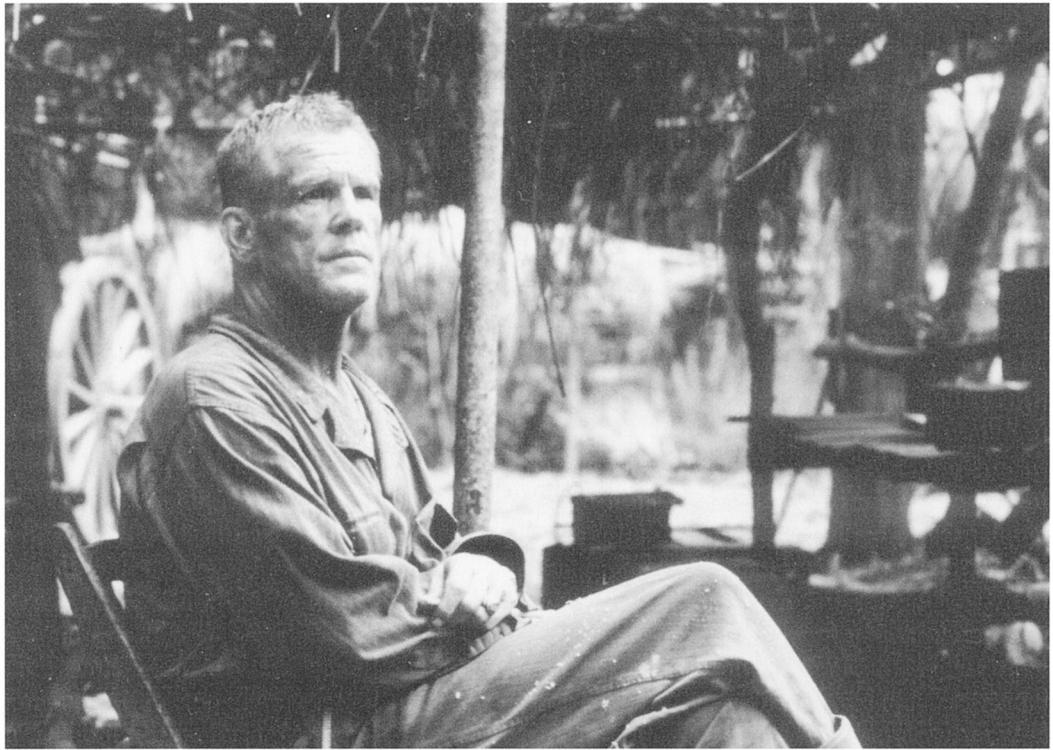
languor of its violence. In *Days of Heaven*, aesthetic distance resides in a complex system of modernist narrative ellipses, but collides with an aesthete's passionate lyricism, much as in *Badlands* the continuing hope of innocence, still visible in quicksilver nature, meets the seeming inevitability of corruption.

In Malick's new film, his first in 20 years, this tension is gone. *The Thin Red Line*, based on James Jones' 1962 novel of World War II, pursues the strains of ardent feeling of the director's earlier work but, without seeming to renounce it, forsakes the irony. The core of the film follows an American battalion's fight against the Japanese for a hill at Guadalcanal, and although this core provides dramatic grounding for the movie, it is flanked at both ends, beginning and end, by stretches of storytelling so fragmentary, so mercurial, they're nearly abstract. In *Badlands* Malick sought the stringency of a tone poem, in *Days of Heaven* the breadth of a ballad; in *The Thin Red Line*, the director aspires to the impersonal grandeur of the epic. In each set of narrative possibilities, Malick finds the same association between pain and ecstasy, but in the earlier films the dialectic bred agitation, while in *The Thin Red Line* it has resolved into a strange tranquility. Narrative here remains tied to archetype, a set of given patterns self-consciously recombined, arranged with the impartial sophistication of a chronicler attuned to the gridwork of collective unconsciousness, but the



Woody Harrelson
as Sergeant Keck

Nick Nolte
as Lieutenant
Colonel Tall



fervently self-reflexive turns of the story, as complex as ever, are no longer in the service of a compulsive skepticism. *The Thin Red Line* is an anti-war movie, but unlike other anti-war movies it superficially resembles, from the hallucinatory inferno of *Apocalypse Now* (1979) to the gung-ho kitsch of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), it is almost entirely free of anger or bitterness. Its battle scenes are poetically matter-of-fact, among the most powerful ever filmed, but its critique of the ethos of war appears to derive from a vantage point of ultimate quiescence, and in that regard, *The Thin Red Line* is unique among American war films.

In its picture of combat, *The Thin Red Line* falls somewhere between Renoir's *Grand Illusion* (1937), with battle scenes put in, and Jancsó's *The Red and the White* (1969) or *Saving Private Ryan*, with the savagery distilled. The representations of battle in *The Thin Red Line* do not shirk the need to confront ferment or unspeakable bestiality. They expose with the single-mindedness of sober, unyielding conviction the fundamental outcome of war: the deaths of boys. With the dulcified logic of an elegy, grievously resigned to past losses but steadfastly borne up against future ones—like the poems of Wilfred Owen—the battle scenes unflinchingly portray relentless casualty, but they do so in a mode of inconsolable lyricism: sudden cuts to the unbearable beauty of a breathtaking, twilight sky that heralds only doom, or protean inserts of a fissured leaf with

blinding light streaming through the holes. Even if, Whitmanesque, they romanticize fated male youth, these lyric interludes do not poeticize the soldiers' deaths—the violence is too immediate—but forthrightly show what it is that these deaths violate. As Renoir does in *Grand Illusion*, Malick refuses the salve of villainy. Even the driven battalion commander, Tall (Nick Nolte), who pushes men to their deaths, is himself—in pensive voiceovers—revealed as vulnerable, and although in the clearest gauge of the film's post-Vietnam dispositions we are confronted with the grisly spectacle of Americans gratuitously torturing entrapped Asians, these scenes appear to propose reversion to barbarity as a refutation of the pseudo-rationality of military science.

The narrative structure of the film divests the battle scenes of the excitement or grandeur typical of the genre. For one thing, the big battle scene is displaced from a climactic position in the story, and after it is over, the film goes on for nearly an hour without heeding any narrative compulsions to build further. Malick risks such anticlimax to strip the battle-scenes of trivializing generic functions that apotheosize a plot's set-ups or generate frivolous suspense. These scenes absorb the heightened energies of elevated rhetoric, to be sure, and they have a hushed, breathtaking sweep, but it is characterized by a diffused sensibility. The primary formal maneuver of these scenes is a sinuous, decentered tracking shot that glides over multiple planes of action,

(from left) Ben
Chaplin as Bell,
John Cusack as Gaff,
and Jim Caviezel
as Witt



following one character and then shifting to others with just the smallest turns of its roving but precisely defined perspective. In these shots, the camera's gaze seems to be at once restive, unflinching, and tender, and even as it shows how each of the men is alone in his fear, it constantly reveals unexpected connections between them in space. In such shots, Malick has solved the problem of how to represent battle as collective strife, against demands of individualist narrative points-of-view. In battle, the men are deindividuated and sympathetically particularized in the same moment. The fracturing of the narrative line also works to refuse the standard emotional parabola of the war film. We are frequently shown effects *before* causes, shown badly wounded men, for instance, before the fighting itself.

The uses of voiceover in the film similarly contribute to the construction of character, synthesizing impersonal chronicle with stream-of-consciousness poetics. In Malick's previous films, the voiceover was the clearest gauge of irony, revealing the distance between the limited perspectives of the characters and the mordant self-reflexivity of the narration. In *Badlands*, Holly (Sissy Spacek) delivered a patter of dime-novel clichés over a steely procession of tersely contrapuntal images, while in *Days of Heaven* the little sister, Linda (Linda Manz), mixed the florid and the taciturn in artlessly meditative monologues that surprise in their patchwork assembly as surely in what they show she does not know

as in what they show she does. These voiceovers ask to be seen as pastiches—of a penny-dreadful false-consciousness or of a kid's tough, slangy talk—yet despite the irony of their deployment, they also comment on the poignancy of misrecognition and the vulnerability of the ignorant or the impressionable. The sentiments uttered in voiceover in *The Thin Red Line* could also easily be heard as clichés. "What is this war in nature?," is the first sentence we hear, murmured earnestly by the AWOL soldier Witt at the start of the film. "I was a prisoner, you set me free. . . . I drink you like water," says Private Bell in an interior monologue addressed to his wife. "You are my sons," thinks the officer, Staros, leaving his battalion, "my dear sons. I carry you inside me."

These musings are delivered with real, direct conviction, and they are not counterpointed by action or images, as the voiceovers in *Days of Heaven* or *Badlands* are. They are elliptical, however, fleeting and fragmentary, and they no more function to convey exposition than the voiceovers of Malick's previous films do. Indeed, so dispersed are they across the film's many characters—at one point, as we're looking at the lifeless face of a half-buried Japanese soldier, we hear a rumination in what we can only assume to be the dead man's voice—and so ephemeral are they, so moody and mercurial, they serve something like the *opposite* function of a traditional voiceover. Far from seeming to grant any privileged access to the interior lives of the

characters, these voiceovers make those interior lives seem *more* mysterious than they would otherwise. They are the fragments of thoughts, prayers, letters home, yet as these forms bleed into one another, and as the voiceovers blur the boundaries of inner and outer—at times what begins as a line of spoken dialogue ends as a voiceover—their address seems finally constant. All the men, together or alone, even at the height of battle, and even if they think they are addressing God or one another or absent lovers, are really talking only to themselves. Their musings would have to be rejected as cliché only if we, as listeners, insisted upon reverting them to a public form, and they claim a measure of their pathos from their forthright platitude, showing a hopeful perseverance of the private, even in the grip of the ultimate, when selves are lost. They are the shards of lost, fleeting voices that, even if we are somehow privy to them, can have no real hearer in the world.

Among other things, *The Thin Red Line* is a mosaic of faces, and the use of actors is determined by the narrative impulse to collectivism—though the jarring appearance of “stars” sometimes undermines this impulse. The dominant scales of the film’s perspectives are long shots and close-ups, and by combining these extremes, Malick synthesizes the epic and the intimate. The close-ups work by principles of Eisensteinian typage, shots sometimes gone too quickly to afford recognition of the actor’s face, and sometimes lingering, held to suggest an oblique, obtuse meaning beyond the visible. Because the narrative follows no single character as its focus, the viewer is repeatedly surprised by the reappearance of characters in unexpected contexts, and because exposition is presented so elusively, the faces take on meanings they might otherwise not have assumed. As Witt, James Caviezel brings an expressive tranquility to the film, and it is right there in his open, angular face, at once beatific and amused, generous and skeptical. In Jones’ novel, Witt is kin to the character of Prewitt from Jones’ previous book, *From Here to Eternity*, famously filmed by Fred Zinneman in 1953, and Caviezel’s facial resemblance to Montgomery Clift, who played Prewitt in Zinneman’s movie, marks the film’s allusive distance from more typical war movies. Caviezel also resembles Ben Chaplin, who plays Bell, and the movie exploits the resemblance by courting confusion between the characters, as if to connote visually the final meditation we hear spoken in the film: “Darkness and light, strife and love—are they the workings of one mind, the features of the same face?”

The movie follows the plot of Jones’ novel fairly closely, with crucial exceptions, but its final effects are

closer to those of another Jones—David—and another James—Joyce. In its mixture of discursive forms, its atomization of character, its plaintive contemplation of the philosophy of war, it bears direct affinities to David Jones’ extraordinary novel/poem/palimpsest of World War I, *In Parenthesis* (1939), while in its marshaling of streams-of-consciousness, it suggests *Ulysses*—and the first memory in the film appears to evoke directly the death of Stephen’s mother in that novel. The film is delicately allusive—the lyricism of the opening suggests Flaherty and Murnau’s *Tabu*, while the battle scenes cite other famous cinematic battles from *Alexander Nevsky* to *Chimes at Midnight*—but the references do not conjure a postmodern citationality. Rather, they function almost subliminally (like allusion in *Ulysses*), introducing a framework of self-consciousness against which to apprehend the story’s emotional content. Malick may be adapting a straightforward war story, but he returns to a distinctively modernist heritage to negotiate the relation between aesthetic distance and emotional engagement.

Malick taught philosophy before he turned to filmmaking, and this meditation on the nature of war, or the war in nature, echoes philosophical treatises on the subject from Heraclitus’s fragments to Kant’s *Perpetual Peace*. By granting such insights to unschooled characters, Malick keeps them from grandiosity and suggests a dialogic, uncontentious interplay of ideas. On the one hand, especially in its lyric mode, the film seems to adopt a Kantian idea of war as the instrument of nature toward the purpose of unifying through differentiation and ordering through the establishment of covenant, accord, or law. On the other hand, the film expresses abhorrence of war to a degree that is astonishing considering its refusal to stir emotional allegiances or proprietary affiliation—as if to express simple rage, or outrage, at the ravages of war would merely reenact the same impulses that brought them about. There is probably no other film that so compellingly represents the horror of war, yet so thoroughly resists the dialectics of conflict. Its tone is mournful, not angry. Watching it, you may feel it is showing you what is slipping inexorably away as you gaze. Look, the film seems to say in shot after shot, *Look: here is what will be lost*.

James Morrison teaches film in the English Department of North Carolina State University. He is the author of *Passport to Hollywood: Hollywood Films, European Directors* (State University of New York Press, 1998) as well as of a memoir to be published by St. Martin’s Press.